Browning's Dilemma in Romantic Inheritance:Dramatic Monologue and the Sense of Poetic Career

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Browning is often considered to be one of the major successors of Romanticism, especially in any consideration of his versatile handling of love poetry, as in "Love among the Ruins", or in his apocalyptic, Gothic poems like "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and the long, conceptual poems from early in his career: *Pauline, Paracelsus* and *Sordello*. However, as Britta Martens argues in *Browning, Victorian Poetic and the Romantic Legacy*, his inheritance of Romanticism does not enable a straightforward analysis of the specific techniques, themes and styles he adopted. Martens pays close attention to Browning's ambivalence towards his poetic and private selves, and describes a fraught artistic struggle in the poet's attachment to and gradual estrangement from Romanticism.

One of the causes for Browning's ambiguity about Romanticism was his urgent need to establish a professional poetic career, unlike the Romantics. (Wordsworth stands as the major exception.) In the creation of the Romantic universe, the sense of career curiously diverged from the business world in favour of the imagination, and triumphant posthumous visions in which the poets gained their artistic and social apotheosis. Their belief in the absolute automatically endorsed careers removed from and transcending practical exigencies. This was to be reconfirmed by the hagiographic public mythmaking after their early deaths, or in the cases of Coleridge and Wordsworth, by their early accomplishments.

Browning struggled in his relation both to this definition of a poetic career and the rapidly growing publishing business. As Britta Martens discusses, it became a pressing concern for Browning to realize the best mode of poetic communication with the public to secure social recognition. This paper will focus on Browning's sense of career as the chief dynamic in the creation and development of his poetry, suggesting that the departure from Romanticism was self-consciously dramatized throughout

his oeuvre. By emphasizing the relation between his deviation from Romantic tradition and his recognition of a new type of poetry career, I also aim to define Browning as a forerunner of the modern professional poet whose writing institutes a critical distance from his private identity. Browning contrived radical techniques to make his poetry differ significantly from that of the preceding era, and in this paper dramatic monologue and historical setting will be emphasized as particular means of submerging the individual into the objective and the matter-of-fact. As Herbert F. Tucker claims,[1] Browning transmuted and established a new mode for contextualizing the personal into the historical, fortifying the narrator's voice as grounded in the actual rather than the visionary. His career, both as a renowned poet and a "lion" in London society, was achieved through an alternative manipulation of poetic subjects, styles and forms; half addressing and half shunning society became a means to engage with the impossible dreams and aspirations of a residual Romantic yearning while also forging pieces for justified public appraisal. In this, he is to be distinguished from Romantic tradition, and it might well be argued that Browning was the greatest beneficiary of Romantic influence.

I

Between 1829 and 1834, although he composed poetry under the strong influence of Romanticism, and especially in the wake of an 1827 reading of Shelley's *Miscellaneous Poems*, Browning was not completely unavailable to other potential careers, notably considering his father's profession of banker. He also wondered, especially after the public disregard of *Pauline* in 1833, if he could become a playwright, writing five plays between 1836 and 1846, including his first play, *Strafford*. Unlike poetry, writing for the stage could be considered as a profession. Nevertheless, Browning made efforts not only to court popularity but to create artistically fine pieces, and blamed William Charles Macready, the actor and director, for being hostile to *The Return of the Druses*, believing its unpopularity and ultimate failure had derived from Macready's unenthusiastic attitude towards it: "I *did* rather fancy that you would have 'sympathized' with Djabert in the main scenes of my play: and your failing to do so is the more decisive against it" (679).[2] Total failure in the theatre profession led him to the exclusive composition of poetry in exile after eloping with Elizabeth Barrett. In this way, at the outset his career as a poet can be contextualized by his ambitions for a publicly acknowledged career, and his attitude is further

understandable in relation to the publishing industry of the 1830s: publishers were unanimously anxious about the bad sales to be expected from an individual poet's work.[3] That Browning acquired the techniques of dramatic writing in this period was to prove significant. His first poems in the dramatic monologue style – "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" – were written in 1836, just a year before *Strafford* was accepted and performed. In Browning's mind, dramatic monologue was deeply related to the business of theatre, and the strong sense of public approbation towards his poetry is latent through all his works and sometimes appears on the surface, as in his address to the English public in *The Ring and the Book*.

Browning's early works, *Pauline, Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, clearly derive from Romantic poetics, casting idealistic protagonists as mouthpieces, and depicting failure in the pursuit of a transcendent vision or policy: the ideal being (*Pauline*), ultimate knowledge (*Paracelsus*), and a perfect political philosophy (*Sordello*). On the one hand, this is an attempt to continue the Romantic mode of writing in imitation of Shelley, and can be considered as an experiment in the validity of such an act in rapidly changing Victorian society. Conversely, it bears witness to an unprecedented obscuring of ambition and message, while maintaining Romantic themes and characters. The majority of his poems end in disillusionment, though there is a clear difference between the final tone of Romantic poems and that to be found in Browning's early poems. Romantic poets never desert the ideal of the absolute, while Browning's protagonists are willing to do so in the wake of failure. It was acute of John Stuart Mill to criticize the protagonist Pauline for lacking actuality.[4] Yet, it seems that Browning's aim was to represent his own complex Romantic ideals while simultaneously communicating a receding belief in Romanticism.

In *Pauline*, imitating Shelley's visionary poems, such as *The Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*, Browning describes a dejected narrator imagining his unattainable ideal woman. Unintentionally un-Romantic in essence, it prepares an unreliable narrator as a proleptic persona of the later dramatic monologues. It totally lacks sociopolitical faith, and places alternative stress on the minute vicissitudes of a mental state, abandoning any organic totality, one of the central features of Romantic poetry.[5] These absences may be considered in relation to Browning's anxiety about public reception, and his excessive negative capability in relation to a protagonist's mental state.

The narrator of *Pauline* in Romantic style attempts unsuccessfully to penetrate

natural and human secrets, wishing to transcend to an ideal world. Browning echoes Shelley in vocabulary like "quivering lip", "enchantment", "brow burned", and "the spell" calling up "the dead."

> . . . some woe would light on me;
> Nature would point at one whose quivering lip
> Was bathed in her enchantments, whose brow burned
> Beneath the crown to which her secrets knelt,
> Who learned the spell which can call up the dead,
> And then departed smiling like a fiend
> Who has deceived God, – (17 - 23)

Affinities with Shelley are heightened in the complaints of the inadequacy of language as a tool for articulating transcendence ("Words are wild and weak, / Believe them not, Pauline!"(904-905)). Shelley depicts the ineffectuality of language both in *Epipsychidion* and in *A Defence of Poetry,*[6] and, superficially, Browning seems to acquiesce to transcendence through imagination. While Shelley's narrator laments his inability to reach an ideal but considers it as still distantly attainable, Browning's despair of language eschews the transcendental for obtaining the ideal state of mind necessary for the creation of Pauline. Confounding phantasmagoria, he forms an alternative narrative indifference to his own idealistic vision, at once both disclosed and disgraced. Solely depending on the power of language, knowledge and love in investigating nature, he creates the ideal figure of Pauline, but concentration on her sickens his mind as self-indulgent idealism.

> Oh, Pauline, I am ruined who believed
> That though my soul had floated from its sphere
> Of wide dominion into the dim orb
> Of self – that it was strong and free as ever! (89-92)

Although only visions and memories of Pauline guarantee the narrator the existence of the ideal world, they are arbitrary and unstable because they are subject to his own mental condition. He never believes in his own psychological power to sustain her, and this lack of faith renders impossible his contact with the ideal imaginary woman, in contrast to Shelley's *The Alastor or Epipsychidion*. He analyzes his impressions of

her rather than pursues full attainment of the ideal. While Shelley identifies his erotic experience with the ideal as truth, Browning objectively observes his creation at some distance, allowing analysis of his mental state as his artistic goal. For Shelley, idealism is the purpose of poetry;[7] for Browning, it is the scrutiny of psychology.

Browning is never enthusiastic about natural objects, which play an immensely important role in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats when intimating the existence of the ideal. Browning's interest resides in the depiction of humanity and the mind in the context of cognized rather than sensuous experience. It is therefore logical that he does not show great attachment to the ideal in *Pauline*, and he even investigates this detachment in detail. For instance, when the narrator despairs of further inspiration, he is described as cynically pleased by this tragic failure:

> I have felt this in dreams – in dreams in which
> I seemed the fate from which I fled; I felt
> A strange delight in causing my decay. (96-98)

This kind of sarcasm never happens in Shelley's poems about ideal beings, and might be considered as a deconstruction of the thematic coherence of the poem. The narrator is indifferent to his idealistic perception being shattered as long as he is able to continue indulging in the contemplation of his impressions. This intense observation of the self through impressions anticipates Walter Pater's assertion at "The Conclusion" of *The Renaissance*: ". . . some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, — for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end" (Pater 152). Contemplation is emphatically described in *Pauline* with an emphatic disregard for its moral nature; the narrator accepts, however, that the fruit is bitter. Objectively staring at the vicissitudes of his psychological state in reaction to his own fantastic imagination, he loses a larger and greater vision of the ideal and his possible, more consummate self, and easily lapses into pessimistic desperation. Here, his cynicism towards Romantic idealism does not seem totally incompatible with some Victorian commentators such as Matthew Arnold. It would receive further indulgence in Rossetti's decadent, self-tormented poetry. Browning offers an indicative but faint sign here, and as in his early poems, he is aware of the danger of solipsism inherent in Romantic poetry. *Pauline* is not just an imitation of but a satire on public criticism of Romantic idealism,

and Browning's ambiguity towards Romanticism can be considered in relation to both his developing aesthetic pursuit and his anxiety about public acceptance.

The narrator's analytical mind is fatal to his Romantic pursuits, while his ambition to understand and assist human beings (to "look and learn / Mankind, its cares, hopes, fears, its woes and joys" (line 443)) gradually declines:

> First went my hopes of perfecting mankind,
> Next – faith in them, and then in freedom's self
> And virtue's self, then my own motives, ends
> And aims and loves, and human love went last. (458-461)

But, unlike Romantic poets who are often revitalized through disappointment and loss, the narrator develops his own pessimism until his aspirations are inverted and condensed into a kind of nihilistic desperation. His observation is separate from moral judgment as he indifferently looks at his mental state, even to its crisis. He finally defines his analytical mind as totally different from those teleologically aspiring towards the ideal, as he becomes almost cynical about himself:

> . . . how I envy him whose soul
> Turns its whole energies to some one end,
> To elevate an aim, pursue success
> However mean! (604 - 607)

This confession proves that he cannot form his physical experience and thought into a synthetic totality, where Romanticism would have absorbed his failures and mistakes and transformed them into a force towards the absolute. This narrator has nothing to do with the absolute but with his momentarily changing mental state.[8] Browning negates the Romantic pursuit of the infinite within the finite self by depicting the process in which the finite suffers from aspiration towards the infinite and gradually collapses upon itself. Focusing on the finite rather than the infinite, Browning engages with the struggle with and deviation from Romanticism again in *Paracelsus*, especially with regard to the social role of poets.

Paracelsus questions intellectualism as opposed to love, as in *Faust* or *Manfred*, and depicts a protagonist who has lost any meaningful social relationship, and accordingly the meaning of his intellectual quest. Only at the last moment, does he

discover that love is indispensable to any human activity: "All this I knew not, and I failed" (line 885). Browning again relies on the metaphor of an ideal woman:

> I seek her now – I kneel – I shriek –
> I clasp her vesture – but she fades, still fades;
> And she is gone; sweet human love is gone! (213-215)

This ideal woman functions symbolically in the same way as in *Pauline*. Browning focuses on the protagonist's psychological state at that moment rather than his regret itself, just as he is only interested in self-satisfaction with intellectual discoveries, not the discoveries themselves. The erotic metaphor again might seem to suggest Browning's negative recapitulation of the love theme in Shelley, and a return to the impossibility of Romantic consummation of knowledge and love attained by Prometheus and Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*.[9] In fact, Paracelsus does not have a chance to learn about love from Aprile until the last moment as Prometheus does from Asia. However, Browning does not describe him as a failed Romantic, like the Maniac in *Julian and Maddalo*, whom the reader is supposed to save by helping similar actual poetic figures through the enlightenment of the poem.[10] Browning does not expect any retrieval in reality for such hypothetical experiments in the imagination. If any reward can be given to Paracelsus or to Browning himself, it has be total public appreciation of his career. If this can be thought of as a kind of love, in his representation of the negative case of Paracelsus, Browning seems to demand love in the form of popularity. Confirming Paracelsus as a spirit of the age, Browning expected public sympathy for his state of mind rather than for his sociopolitical beliefs, half identifying himself with Paracelsus.[11] Indeed, he mentions his expectation of public acceptance in the preface to *Paracelsus* (later discarded): "I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded: and this for a reason. I have endeavoured to write a poem, not a drama . . . a work like mine depends more immediately on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success . . ." (735). Browning's attitude in inviting the reader to empathize with the poet's view, as opposed to that of the narrator or characters, is an attempt to make himself understood as an instance of contemporary psychology: the observing eye witnessing various aspects of the finite (in relation to the infinite) in various

careers of life. This tendency is clearly determined in his use of dramatic monologue, but actually starts in his earlier poems. As Martens says, it is an attempt both to transform the public perception and establish his own career: "He either attempts a transformation of his audience's taste and expectations, in the hope of transforming his status and literary reputation, or he seeks a self-transformation through self-reflection which helps to (re)define his poetic identity" (Martens 16). Romantic poets and characters lose themselves in their soliloquies while Browning detaches them from himself, and this distance enables him to deploy a variety of possible careers as characters in his poetry, and to objectively and minutely investigate their mental states. Miller configures an alternative in "life": "There is no otherness, no mystery, in his world. Every person is immediately comprehensible to him because each man lives a life Browning himself might have lived" (Miller 116). Paracelsus marks the beginning of multiple representations of possible selves objectified in dramatic monologues such as *Andrea delSarto, Fra Lippo Lippi, and AbtVogler*. The characters in these poems, like Paracelsus, discuss their own thoughts about art, and their unreliable attitudes greatly affect the artistic quality of the poems. Their ambiguity allows us to evaluate their sincerity and significance only relatively. Paracelsus's theme of love, therefore, does not involve Romantic yearning, but his utterance of it is valuable as an instance of artistic self-consciousness. Browning is interested neither in describing the failure of an ideal figure nor in social betterment through poetry, unlike the Romantics. No one would confound Paracelsus for Faust, an active entity influencing the actual. Browning's emphasis on observation may be clearly distinguished from Romantic self-absorption, and is liberated from the enthusiastic creeds and beliefs of Romantic idealism. Browning's relativism might reflect his struggle in modifying the Romantic mode and balancing it with the actual. As a result, he resorts to the historical settings of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. *Sordello* seems to treat the theme of the irreconcilable gap between the imaginative and the social for the first time, and in this sense marks Browning's final verdict on the impossibility of maintaining a pure Romantic idealism in the Victorian age.

Sordello further explains Browning's adaptation of Romantic poetry in a negative way. Sordello first appears as a typical visionary Romantic, wandering about the woods and imagining gods and demi-gods as the most desirable companions. His nature is defined by his lack of social consciousness; his poetry is unpremeditated and improvised, and is created intuitively and for its own sake. In the contest with Eglamor, he is so absorbed in his impromptu recitation that he only realizes his

victory after his work's completion: "And when he woke 't was many a furlong thence, . . . but his front / Was crowned – was crowned!" (2. 110 - 113)[12] When Sordello finally realizes his own social role, it is so vague that he conflates his dream with its feasibility:

> ". . . and though I must abide
> With dreams now, I may find a thorough vent
> For all myself, acquire an instrument
> For acting what these people act; my soul
> Hunting a body out may gain its whole
> Desire some day!" (1. 832-837)

His "desire" in using poetic power for politics portends to be fatal because it comes and goes according to unreliable inspiration, and never remains for immediate practical application. In a sense, his expectations repeat those of the narrator in *Pauline*, who aspires to create stability from an unstable imagination. Sordello's fantastic vision is irretrievably shattered when he encounters the reality of the court in Mantua: "He lost the art of dreaming" (2. 850), and, like the solipsistic narrator in *Pauline*, his failure seems to question rather than defend adaptability to social demands and the expectations of idealistic poets.

Sordello also covers the theme in *Paracelsus* of applying poetic wisdom to social goodness. Browning describes the clear divergence between the epistemic and the pragmatic, suggesting this inevitable dilemma for idealistic schemes. When Sordello relinquishes the idea of pursuing his poetic career and determines to be politically involved for the sake of humanity and for the future, he simply tries to apply his poetic measure to the entangled problem of the Guelf and the Ghibelline opposition. Like a Romantic, he tries to disseminate his idealism among the public. In his mind, this strategy is almost the same as giving tangible form and a feasible system to his poetic creed: "— supply a body to his soul / Thence, and become eventually whole with them as he had hoped to be without –" (4. 203 - 205). Sordello describes his attempt to use people as a canvas on which to draw a picture of an ideal future:

> While our Sordello only cared to know
> About men as a means whereby he'd show
> Himself, and men had much or little worth

According as they kept in or drew forth
That self; the other's choicest instruments
Surmised him shallow. (4. 620-625)

Paracelsus's self-righteousness is repeated here as poetic elitism, which limits rather than liberates Sordello's ability to handle political matters. He tries to set an ideal target (like the reborn Rome in his dream) as an ultimate goal, when he needs to negotiate for both political sides. Naturally, such a vague message is not heard or accepted by the public, as is the case with Paracelsus's elitist schemes for social progress. Since his idealism is endangered, he is required to take a new, different point of view to balance his poetic vision with his surroundings, and is gradually reconciled to multi-faceted reality and to relative ways of thinking:

"So much is truth to me. What Is, then? Since
One object, viewed diversely, may evince
Beauty and ugliness – this way attract,
That may repel, – why gloze upon the fact?
Why must a single of the sides be right?
What bids choose this and leave the opposite?
Where's abstract Right for me? (6. 441 - 447)

This virtually decides Sordello's final acknowledgement of loss, and the final verdict on the defeat of Romantic idealism is expressed as his inadequate nature for contemporaneous needs and atmospheres. His recognition of his ideological defeat strikes him decisively, assaulting body and soul: "Once this understood, / As suddenly he felt himself alone, / Quite out of Time and this world: all was known" (6. 484 - 486). Yet all is not known: he is merely left with a relative acceptance of ongoing phenomena. All he can do is accept his own impressions and understanding as temporarily available and valid, and modify his idealism into a publicly digestible and feasible form. Forced to comply with contemporaneous social codes, his idealism becomes compatible with opportunism, which is explained as the contrast between the finite and the infinite, and with the implication that Victorian society is a totally unsuitable background for a Romantic idealist like Sordello:

Let the employer match the thing employed,

> Fit to the finite his infinity,
> And thus proceed for ever, in degree
> Changed but in kind the same, still limited
> To the appointed circumstance and dead
> To all beyond. A sphere is but a sphere;
> Small, Great, are merely terms we bandy here;
> Since to the spirit's absoluteness all
> Are like. (6. 498 - 506)

Just as Tennyson defines the earth as a limited sphere, seeing it from outer space in *In Memoriam*, Browning conceives of this world as a sphere in which the infinite has to be modified to achieve its best possible but finite effect. Though he realizes that phenomena are evanescent, Sordello still applies his idealism to unreliable media in order to witness even its faintest effect, but without success. In his view, the ideal has to exist beyond the present and the real, and he extends this ambition into moral and political contexts. With his alienation from this world comes the knowledge that his beliefs will never be widely shared among the public. The ideal has to be recovered for the present and the real to coexist, and Sordello finally has this intimation at the very end of his life. However, such a different view with its precarious morals and value judgments threatens his idealism, and deprives him of his life. Ultimately, the pure Romantic spirit dies along with him. As a Romantic protagonist, he has to die confronted by a radical paradigm shift, with a concomitant fictional death for the Romantic Browning, and a declaration for the end of Romantic poetry. Although the narrator describes via Palma, "A triumph lingering in the wide eyes, / Wider than some spent swimmer's if he spies / Help from above in his extreme despair" (6. 615 - 617), it is hard to believe that Sordello's final realization at his death is triumphant. Browning had to kill Sordello to inaugurate his own distinct poetic mode, by radically developing the dramatic monologue form, and defining his difference from the Romantics, as Martens points out: "Dramatic monologues do not pretend to be the sincere self-expression of their authors, who replace their own voice with that of a dramatic speaker whose identity and context are significantly different from their own. The poet thus escapes the dangers of solipsism and self-exposure inherent in the Romantic confessional mode" (Martens 8). Sordello's relativism annihilates his absolutism, and directs responsibility for understanding the significance of the infinite in the finite towards the reader. How appropriate is Sordello's idealism to a

contemporary public, and will they respond in the same way as the fictional public? A particular question persists for the reader in dramatic monologues: how sincere is the narrator in his aspirations? At the end of the poem, the Romantic teleology of life is rejected as too restrictive, and a relativistic embrace of the ordinary is recommended: "Must life be ever just escaped, which should / Have been enjoyed?" (6. 561 - 62) Rigorous idealism is compromised by life, and is at odds with the vain but vigorous progress of Victorian society. Browning answers this by enacting a synthesis of the ideal and the secular in the vital articulations of dramatic monologue.[13)]

II

History's chronology guarantees a certain matter-of-factness to a persona's self-expression, while location in poetic form grants the status of artefact.[14)] Maintaining an aesthetic distance from his protagonists' sociopolitical thoughts and discussions, Browning records an historical individual's veracity, while art can be harnessed to expose the contradictions of historical voices. Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto, and Abt Vogler differ in their views on art, and do not share belief in one ideological or philosophical system. Religious views also place characters in contrast, notwithstanding their different sects, as in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra". All the characters state their own beliefs as truths based on their experience, and Browning's representation of these truths reflects his deep interest in the plays already mentioned. However strange the characters' words and deeds are, they are always expected to be understood or even supplemented by the audience's reaction and interpretation. Cutting an historical scene, either actual or imagined, Browning applies the fragmentary nature of dramatic monologue to render the protagonists' relative view of "truths" convincing. According to Lawrence Poston III, limited human perception is affirmed in artistic concentration on the moment:

> If it is only in short "facet-flashes" that we perceive the unchanging realm beyond the time-bound world in which we live and act, then that limitation of our perception is better dramatized in a compressed form which focuses on a decisive moment in the life of a speaker than it is in a five-act play or a discursive narrative in which exposition may tend to diminish the dramatic force of those moments of illumination. (Poston 81)[15)]

If we interpret his use of "mutual negation" as "limitation," Miller similarly suggests the surfacing of truths through fragmentary but multiple representation:

> The multiplication of points of view becomes a kind of elaborate oblique incantation which evokes the divine truth at the center of each finite person or event. The proliferation of perspectives on the story has as its goal by a kind of mutual negation to make something else appear, something which can never be faced directly or said directly in words. (Miller 152)

For example, Browning's most ambitious dramatic monologue, *The Ring and the Book*, narrates the same incident of murder several times, but all the narrative reports embody fragments of the total fact, only bringing its various aspects to light, and revealing the truth of the abyss of life's mysteries. The narrative is interested neither in instruction nor in providing moral judgment. In contrast to *The Cenci*, a Romantic murder tragedy, Browning's poem never reassures the reader with a conclusion nor with a certain moral statement. His conception of the "dramatic" does not follow the Aristotelian rules of drama or the extended expositions of the Romantic closet dramas.

Browning's fragmentary representation puts the reader in an uneasy suspense because it disregards not only absolute values but also apparent moral judgments. The protagonists' emotions and thoughts are so temporarily represented, encumbered with preoccupied matters and incidents, that they prevent the reader from obtaining conclusive perspectives with which to judge personality and morality, despite the invitational tone of the poems to do so. The cases of Fra Lippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto typically show the divergence between their aesthetic and secular domains, rendering their behaviour morally dubious and, therefore, undermining the Romantic ideal of identifying life with art. The more apparent criminal cases in "Porphyria's Lover," "The Last Duchess", and *The Ring and the Book*, are presented as only understandable in the adherent context, without any definitive comment. Vivienne J. Rundle notes within *The Ring and the Book* a persistent delaying of "the ethical moment" (Rundle 109), which defines the reader as a highly engaged arbiter: "*The Ring and the Book* insists on the process of judging – insists that the reader actively and continually participate in the process of judgment – but this is not the same as insisting that absolute judgment be attained" (Rundle 104). Browning endeavours to divide the ideal and the secular, which can be coexistent but never identifiable. He

shifts the poet's role from that of a vate, bestowing wise maxims (as in Carlyle's model) to that of a presenter of the actual, offering the reader the privilege of interpretation.[16] Abt Vogler performs this transition in perspective, and can feel the prevalence of God in artistic creativity, as if he is in a trance while in motion towards the ideal: "the pinnacled glory reached, and the pride of my soul was in sight" (line 24). However, he never intends to submerge his own entity into the ideal, but on the contrary, emphasizes the significance of the (artistic) absolute grounded on earth: "the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach the earth" (line 27). For the sensitive few, God "whispers in the ear" (line 87). In the protagonist's involvement in the secular (the finite) and in the ideal (the infinite), art is never ascribed as transcendent, while it is the elements of the sublunary which gain the ascendant. The reader, suspended between the two realms, is induced to define the absolute and the sacred as arbitrary.

Such a radical alternative relationship with the reader would have been hard to accept by those nurtured on Romantic poetry, just as John Ruskin experienced difficulty in understanding "Popularity." Ruskin's criticisms and Browning's reply might be interpreted as the opposition between the readability and the originality of poetry, or between art for enlightenment and art for art's sake. While Browning employs symbols for their own sake - the star, the feast master, the fisher as a poet – and out of their historical and biblical contexts, Ruskin insists on a poet's transparent semantic integrity, and is critical of linguistic ambiguity. Browning vehemently retorted that his poetry was never intended for public understanding, and defended his symbolism and poetic license:

> I cannot begin writing poetry till my imaginary reader has conceded licences to me which you demur at altogether. I *know* that I don't make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. […] Do you think poetry was ever generally understood – or can be? Is the business of it to tell people what they know already, as they know it, and so precisely that they shall be able to cry out – 'Here you should supply *this* – *that*, you evidently pass over, and I'll help you from my own stock? It is all teaching, on the contrary, and the people hate to be taught. They say otherwise; – make foolish fables about Orpheus enchanting stocks and stones, poets standing up and being worshipped, – all nonsense and impossible dreaming. A poet's affair is with God, – to whom he is accountable,

> and of whom is his reward; look elsewhere, and you find misery enough. Do you believe people understand *Hamlet*? (691 - 93)

This might sound imitative of a Romantic preface such as Shelley's for *Prometheus Unbound*, suggesting the inviolable supremacy of poetic inspiration, public ignorance and denial in the face of didactic poetry. But Browning clearly negates any liaison with society in propagating his sensibility and beliefs, without expecting the public to share his conception of the ideal. (Even Shelley expected understanding only from "the select few.") Here Browning's aestheticism is aligned with a disregard for the social significance of his poetry. In the context of his worship of Byron, Wordsworth and Scott, Ruskin must have felt that Browning was as different and distant from the Romantics as Whistler's paintings were from those of the Pre-Raphaelites.[17)]

Browning's symbolism works relatively, creating the ambiguities which perplexed Ruskin. For Browning, a poem's mystique is obtained in its communion with God, but its meaning is never to be fully revealed because its power lies in its ultimate incomprehensibility. In fact, what Browning implies as "the infinite" does not exist as a constant, but is a new extraordinary presentation of "the finite", only appearing at a certain time on a specific occasion in a comparable way to the Paterian impression coming "for that moment only" (Pater 152). Once the reader experiences poetry, its purpose has been completed, irrespective of any moral and sociopolitical message.[18)] Browning demonstrates a concern for the representation of the unfamiliar aspects in the familiar, and by so doing, how to disclose the psychological varieties of human beings hidden under social codes and customs. This aim implies an ambition for objectivity, but Browning's art foregrounds empathy with his character's voices and multiple viewpoints as well as enacting a great artistic command over them. However, in the same correspondence with Ruskin, his sense of possession reveals another dilemma retained from the Romantic inheritance: the presence of autobiography.

Ruskin is especially critical of the autobiographical nature of Browning's poetry in *Pippa Passes:*

> And in the second place, I entirely deny that a poet of your real dramatic power ought to let *himself* come up, as you constantly do, through all manner of characters, so that every now and then poor Pippa herself shall speak a long piece of Robert Browning. (690)

Ruskin is referring to the Epilogue of *Pippa Passes* in which Pippa discloses the fact that she has been controlling, or so she imagines, the other characters' voices or thoughts, locating herself as an omnipotent viewpoint through which all the incidents of the drama are explicable:

> I have just been the holy Monsignor;
> And I was you too, Luigi's gentle mother,
> And you too, Luigi! . . .
> And I was Jules the sculptor's bride,
> And I was Ottima beside,
> And now what am I ? (Epilogue. 42 - 44, 51 - 53)

Together with the fact that the other characters take Pippa's singing voice as a kind of providence and conscientiously redress their deeds, it is undeniable that Pippa functions as an engine to construct the drama's plot, contrasting her innocence with their struggles and predicaments.[19] (Sebald, for example, regrets his deeds and determines to part with Ottima, listening to Pippa's voice: "That little peasant's voice / Has righted all again" (1. 261 - 62).) As the characters are represented as the prey of circumstance, and definitely emerging form Pippa's voice, she is considered to be an act of ventriloquy on Browning's part, embodying his will: "Now, one thing I should like to really know; / How near I ever might approach all these / I only fancied being, this long day" (Epilogue. 99 - 101).

In reply to Ruskin, Browning asserted: "I *may* put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids. If so, *peccavi*: but I don't see myself in them, at all events" (692). In an equivocal tone, Browning both concedes and denies self-involvement. But, however he defends himself, it seems obvious that his occasional self-revelation is inevitable, with the reader expected to acknowledge such a habit as taken for granted. In "One Word More," addressed to and perhaps encouraged by Elizabeth Barrett, he is more explicit about his own voice as interwoven in the voices of his fictional characters: "Let me speak this once in my true person, / Not as Lippo, Roland or Andrea" (137 - 38). Contrary to his retort to Ruskin, he implies that he intentionally ventriloquized his thoughts and feelings through different characters with his partial self reflected in them. This makes Browning's poetics problematic. Such self-identification with his personae undermines the effect of his poetic technique, and compromises the objectivity of dramatic monologue. If one has to imagine Browning

himself eternally behind all his characters, one is led to ask which aspects of his psychology are in play, and how much one is allowed to believe in their words.[20] In looking at his personae with their widely differing creeds and actions, one cannot be convinced of Browning's thoughts as latent, while a conception of relativized fragmentary selves is hard to maintain.

Browning's proclamation of ownership of his personae's voices once more calls into question the autobiographical mode with which he experimented in *Pauline, Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, and it is possible to see his early attempts as traditionally confessional and as simulacra of his own consciousness. Through a distanced control of the personae's voices, he could avoid total self-identification with them and, therefore, criticism.[21] Yet it is still questionable why this strategy was necessary. Perhaps it testifies to the remnants of Browning's ambivalent preoccupation with Romanticism. His desire to control his personae's voices shows both his wish to be congruent with them through empathy (or "negative capability") and his intimacy with Romantic perception from an egoistic point of view. The world, after all, should be grasped subjectively. This philosophy in fact powerfully helped consolidate his career as a poet. Simulating various careers (for example, artists like Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto, and Abt Vogler, or the religious figures in "The Grammarian's Funeral" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra"), he evaluates the possible results of some unchosen careers as "the road not taken." But his idea remains relative: he has to control the personae's voices in order to demonstrate that the career of control is superlative, both in imagination and in real life.

For Romantics, to be a poet is an absolute commission with the ideal and the beyond, and is, therefore, incomparable.[22] However, unable to embrace such a view, Browning chose the career of poet without the guarantee of the absolute, relying on comparison as a means to secure his ambition. He experienced multiple careers in the imagination, assessing them in comparison with the life of the poet. Miller puts it as follows: "He can approach an absolute vision only by attempting to relive, one by one, all the possible attitudes of the human spirit" (Miller 107). This seems adequate, except that his absolute vision also includes having a perfect career. The autobiographical traits residing behind the personae's voices reconfirm the omnipotence of Browning's poetic career in comparison to the other possibilities conjured in different periods and lands; and they are presented precisely because they can be created and controlled in the imagination. In a great literary paradox, by relinquishing Romantic idealism Browning re-evaluated and made absolute the

poetic career as supreme, and ironically strengthened Romanticism's elitist trajectory. Browning's beliefs are distinct from the Romantic monolith of the poet as prophet, but his relativism still encompasses the social significance of the poet who may provide the public with truths superintended by a powerful intellect. Dramatic monologue liberated poetry from the mystical idealism of the select few. With this new autobiographical technique, Browning overcame rather than succumbed to Romantic poetry. This paradigm shift towards an autobiographical commission in poetry has made his inheritance of Romanticism idiosyncratic but successful. His love of poetry finally enabled the solution for overcoming his Romantic dilemma, both fortifying a new poetic mode and gaining professional popularity. In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning emphasizes "Lyric Love" as the power to persuade people of the significance of poetry and of his own poetic mode beyond different cultures: "Might mine but lie outside thine, Lyric Love, / Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised) / Linking our England to his Italy! (12. 868-870)."[23)]

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1) Tucker argues for a purer lyricism in Browning created alongside Romantic lyricism, and suggests the importance of the historical background for its development: "The hybrid dramatic monologue, as a result of its aim to make the world and subjectivity safe for each other in the interests of character, had proved a sturdy grafting stock for flowers of lyricism; and the governing pressures of the genre, just because they governed so firmly, had bred hothouse lyric varieties of unsurpassed intensity" (Tucker 29).

2) All quotations from Robert Browning's writings are from the following (except those from *Sordello* and *The Ring and the Book*) and shown in parentheses with page or line numbers: *Robert Browning*, Ed. Adam Roberts (Oxford University Press 1997).

3) Richard Cronin affirms the same: "It is, I think, significant that the dramatic monologue should first have been developed in the 1830s, when poets enjoyed such small sales, when publishers were so reluctant to issue their work (Edward Moxon was in that decade the only London publisher prepared to bring out volumes written by a single poet, and he did so usually on the basis that the poet bore the costs) that they can only have suspected that they were talking, like so many speakers of dramatic monologues, to themselves" (Cronin 49).

4) Mill criticizes the poem's superficiality and insincerity in presenting an ideal female figure: "I know not what to wish for him but that he may meet with a *real* Pauline" (731).

5) For example, Coleridge argues for "organic" poetry, explaining of Shakespeare: "The organic form on the other hand, is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one & the same with the perfection of its outward Form. Such is the Life, such the form—Nature, the prime Genial Artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms" (Coleridge, 495).

6) Shelley describes the fall in the narrator's journey towards the transcendent in *Epipsychidion*: "Woe is me! / The winged words on which my soul would pierce / Into the height of love's rare Universe, / Are chains of lead around its flight of fire" (587-590). The same idea is repeated in describing the inconstant visit of inspiration in *A Defence of Poetry*: ". . . when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet" (Shelley 504).

7) Browning's summation of Shelley's poetry specifies a reach from the physical to the abstract: "I would rather consider Shelley's poetry as a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal . . ." (589).

8) Cf. "The dramatic monologue has fairly well abandoned the project of 'presenting' an underlying wholeness. It recognizes the self-destroying quality of the idea of wholeness, an idea that can only be realized in discourse" (Martin 81).

9) J. Hillis Miller also defines the tragic failures in Paracelsus as Promethean: "The dramatic climax of Browning's three earliest poems is the failure of romantic Prometheanism" (Miller 97).

10) Rundle's evaluation of Guido through re-reading may add some significance to Guido's role in the overall narrative of *The Ring and the Book*. However, the reader's interest in Guido never provides a sense of metafictional resonance towards the actual as expected in Romantic poetry. In this sense, Rundle's saving of Guido is quite different from that of the Maniac in its expansion of the circumference of the fictional to overpower the actual: "If Guido's story is not reread, he will be condemned to a perpetually repeated execution: beheaded for the first time in actuality and ever after in the consciousness of his readers. If, on the other hand, Guido can convince his

reader to reinterpret events, his life will be viewed differently. Of course, the reader cannot erase Guido's execution, but he or she can revise Guido's sentence, in the Jamesian sense of revision as reviewing and rewriting. In the reader's revision of Guido's story, he can be viewed not only as a wolf or a murderer but also as a gifted storyteller" (Rundle 111).

11) In her letter of 20 March 1845, Elizabeth Barrett calls Robert Browning Paracelsus half-jokingly: "You are Paracelsus, and I am a recluse."

12) All quotations from *Sordello* are from the following and shown with book and line numbers in parentheses: Robert Browning, *The Works of Robert Browning: Volume I*, 10 vols. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966).

13) Christine Froula suggests that dramatic monologue puts the theme of *Sordello* into a more comprehensible form: "His later turn to dramatic monologue can be understood as a development from the impossible *Sordello*, translating *Sordello*'s project into a different and far more accessible form" (Froula 180). Her comment, however, implies that Browning's Romantic ambition has not entirely drained away, as in his attachment to the protagonists' voices as I will discuss later.

14) Poston suggests that Browning purposely chose figures who are hardly known so as to maximize his poetic license in creating their personalities and deeds: "For this purpose, what serves him best are figures like Paracelsus and Sordello who have historical identities but about whom little is historically known; in them we sense the pressures of an age, while at the same time we participate imaginatively in the poet's freedom to reconstruct them as persons, a reconstruction untrammelled by an excess of biographical data" (Poston 86). Martens similarly points out Browning's use of forged history: "The speaker thus seems to imply that the book's materiality is a guarantee for the authenticity of the facts and his faithful presentation of them, although the author must have been all too aware that his source did of course not contain facts in an empirical sense but only written interpretations of events"(Martens 180).

15) Slinn describes Browning's representation of "truths" in life as a process: "Through foregrounding this thematic interplay, Browning emphasizes not truth as product, but truth as process, truth in the making, and in that process truth is both subverted by language and produced by it" (Slinn 118).

16) Martens describes Browning's struggle with the public as the process of his compromise in balancing realism and idealism "trying to appeal both to readers who only value empirical facts and dismiss literature as a lie and to those readers who still adhere to the Romantic concept of the poet as a vatic mediator of transcendental truths" (Martens 167). Demand for realism, however, seems to come not only from the public but also from Browning's strong sense of self-defence through the matter-of-fact.

17) Christine Froula sees in Ruskin's criticism a sense of Romantic aversion to the detached tone of modernist poetry: "Ruskin's complaint of Browning's untraversable, glacial wordscapes anticipates the common charge of the metaphysical coldness of modernist poetics, the bareness and scantiness of the garments its words supply" (Froula 182).

18) Antony H. Harrison offers another instance in *Cleon* both as Paterian and, in a sense, anti-Romantic in the protagonist's "inability to attain Wordsworthian 'joy'" (Harrison 62): "From Cleon's point of view, then, consciousness benefits man, not because it allows for the perception of moral or spiritual truth, but because, as 'the sense of sense' (l. 224), it enables man to savor sensations in the fashion of the Paterian aesthete, for whom 'experience itself is the end,' being present 'always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy.' Pater defines 'success in life' as Cleon defines it: a 'quickened, multiplied consciousness' generated by 'forever . . . courting new [sensory] impressions'" (Harrison 54). It is certain that

Browning was more sensitive to changing contemporaneous thoughts and ethos than, for example, Tennyson, who was ready to respond to various kinds of events but was reluctant to accept strange ideas as an aspect of lived reality.

19) Some critics distinguish Pippa's influence from providence, and try to interpret her as another puppet character like the others in the play. For example, David G. Riede suggests authorial control rather than that of providence: "The characters in *Pippa Passes* are not in fact transformed by Pippa's songs – each character accepts Pippa's song as somehow authoritative, but interprets it in such a way as to authorize his own limited and self-aggrandizing selfhood. . . . she sounds far more like the author of *Sordello* than an adolescent silk-weaver" (Riede 194, 199). Although he removes the term "providence," his argument eventually reconfirms the omnipotence of the author in influencing and regulating the protagonists one way or another.

20) John Maynard denies that Browning's personae represent his various selves. They represent those of the readers: "But what a prodigy of massive and mighty sensibility we have then to appreciate in our interpretation of that poem!" (Maynard 73) In other words, he gave up presenting the kind of poetry which corresponds with their common sensibility. Instead, he prepared the technique which can reflect any kind of sensibility in its representation of the personae: "Once we see the poem working in this way to engage the reader as part of its existence/performance, we necessarily read ourselves and our many selves, the readers before us. Instead of tooting our slughorns in the wilderness, we will be directing an entire orchestra" (Maynard 78).

21) This is also a contrivance to conceal his private self, and Martens discusses how Browning distinctively separated his public from his poetic self: "he vigorously maintain that the authentic self (for Trilling the individual self independent of society) cannot be presented in poetry, which is always a public performance" (Martens 232). However, Browning knew that such a dichotomy was not totally granted in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His theory too shows his interest and fear in owing his personae's voices.

22) Richard Cronin describes a typical attitude of the Romantic poets concerning career-making through business, citing Wordsworth's case: "The business of becoming a poet is made to seem all but independent of the business of writing poems, and completely independent of the business of having them published (a posture reinforced by the long-delayed publication of the *Prelude* itself)" (Cronin 31). With or without an apparent intention for success in the publishing business, it is apparently a matter of talent to be straightforwardly accepted by the public, and not of contrived manoeuvres with which to handle the public.

23) All quotations from *The Ring and the Book* are from the following and shown with book and line numbers in parentheses: Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961).